

GEORGETOWN

HISTORIC

DISTRICT



WASHINGTON, D.C.

# GEORGETOWN HISTORIC DISTRICT

Roughly bounded by Reservoir Road and Dumbarton Oaks Park on the north, Rock Creek Park on the east, the Potomac River on the south, and Glover-Archbold Parkway on the west. Includes approximately 4000 primary buildings c. 1765-1940. Established by Old Georgetown Act 9/22/50. Designated a National Historic Landmark in 1967, the Georgetown Historic District is included in the D. C. Inventory of Historic Places and listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

- Remarkably intact example of a complete historic town.
- Encompasses the area laid out as a port town in 1751 prior to the establishment of the District of Columbia, and later absorbed into the city of Washington.
- Rich variety of residential, commercial, institutional, and industrial buildings dating from all periods.
- Includes many of city's oldest buildings
- Narrow grid streets establish intimate scale in contrast to L'Enfant city
- Wide range of houses from simple frame dwellings to spaciouly landscaped mansions recording all social levels of the community.
- Extremely varied architectural styles, including Federal, Greek Revival, Italianate, Queen Anne, Romanesque, and Classical Revival examples, as well as numerous vernacular structures.

**Restoring or renovating your Georgetown property?**  
**Call the D.C. Historic Preservation Division.**  
 An historic preservation professional is  
 assigned to assist you with technical information.  
**202-727-7360**

## SUGGESTED READING:

*Georgetown Historic Waterfront.* Washington, D. C.: Commission of Fine Arts, 1993.

The Junior League of Washington. *The City of Washington: An Illustrated History.* Edited by Thomas Froncek. New York: Wing Books, 1992.

Lesko, Kathleen M. *Black Georgetown Remembered.* Valerie Babb and Carroll R. Gibbs, Contributing Authors. Washington, D. C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991.

*Records.* The Columbia Historical Society of Washington, D. C.

On the cover: Detail, *The Stoddert Children*, by Charles Willson Peale, 1789. The earliest view of the Georgetown waterfront, showing tobacco warehouses and shipping lanes south of Mason's Island.

**Painting shown in full on opposite page:** Shipping merchant Benjamin Stoddert served with distinction during the Revolution, acted as confidential agent for President Washington in purchase of land for the Federal City, was appointed first Secretary of the Navy by President John Adams. View from his home, Halcyon House, 3400 Prospect Street (1787). Courtesy Dumbarton House.



*"Never have I attended a more complete banquet, or met better dressed or better mannered people than I met on my arrival in George Town, which is named after our gracious majesty. The men are very large and gallant, while the ladies are the most beautiful that my eyes have ever looked upon... George Town is indescribably lovely and I am loathe to leave it and its hospitable people."*

General Edward Braddock, 1755

From its founding in 1751 to the present day, Georgetown has been internationally known for hosting public events and private celebrations in a setting of unusual beauty, both natural and designed. Whether giving the doomed British General Edward Braddock a memorable send-off during the French and Indian War or presiding over the birth of atomic research and the United Nations at Dumbarton Oaks in the 1940s, this reputation has been constant. When the federal government moved to the new national capital in 1800, Georgetown was the center of social, cultural, and diplomatic life. During his triumphal return in 1824-25, General LaFayette was entertained at Tudor Place by Martha Parke Custis Peter, granddaughter of Martha Washington. For two centuries, ambitious young legislators have made their homes here, among them Thomas Jefferson and John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Diplomats, cultural leaders, and others have also claimed Georgetown as their own.

In the beginning, Georgetown's prosperity and acclaim were founded upon commercial opportunity. The town's fine harbor near the head of Potomac River tidewater in Maryland brought visitors and goods from ports in Britain, Europe, the West Indies, and along the Atlantic coast. George Washington's Patowmack Canal and its successor Chesapeake & Ohio Canal extended Georgetown's commercial influence deep into the western frontier, reaching as far as Fort Osage on the Missouri, Lake Erie, and Mobile through connections with overland routes to

the Mississippi and its tributaries. At the end of the Revolution, Georgetown was at the mid-point of the country. The post road linking north and south ran through the town, crossing the Potomac by ferry. Roads from Frederick, Leesburg, Alexandria, and Bladensburg made Georgetown a regional social, cultural, and commercial center. By 1790, George Washington himself described Georgetown as the foremost exporter of tobacco in Maryland, if not the country. It was the place of

residence and business for many who owned large tracts of land elsewhere in Maryland and Virginia.



(above) **Uriah Forrest.** Hero of the Revolution; member, Continental Congress; Mayor of Georgetown, 1792; partner in Forrest, Stoddert & Murdock, shipping merchants; with Stoddert, one of the original proprietors of the District. Courtesy Library of Congress.



(above right) **The Forrest-Marbury House,** 3350 M Street (1788-90). Here Forrest hosted a dinner closing the deal for purchase of the land for the Federal City. 1856 photo. Courtesy Library of Congress.

In the summer of 1789, Georgetowners made the fateful decision to lobby Congress to locate the Federal City here. But their success in negotiating this coup eventually led to the loss of the viability of their harbor and the autonomy of their town. The objections voiced by some in 1791 when the land deal was finalized were renewed in 1801 when the citizens of Georgetown discovered that they would have no representation in the Congress which would control their affairs. Georgetown flourished in the decade between the selection of the site for the Federal City and the arrival of the government in 1800. Fortunes were made in shipping and real estate. The town contributed in many ways to building the new capital. Though there were foreshadowings of problems to come, prosperity continued until the War of 1812.

In 1809 the Long Bridge was built in approximately the position of today's 14th Street bridge, obstructing Georgetown's shipping channel. Pleas to relocate the bridge upriver from the Georgetown harbor were ignored by Congress. As their harbor trade declined, Georgetowners found themselves over-taxed compared to the benefits of their inclusion in the Federal City.

Economic depression and a sense of betrayal led to increasing demands for retrocession in the 1830s and 1840s. These reached a peak with the retrocession of Alexandria City and County in 1847.



**Thomas Sim Lee Corner,** 3009-3001 M Street (1794-1810). Early Federal shops with dwellings above. The corner grocery has a long tradition in Washington. Courtesy Kiplinger Washington Collection, W. E. Barrett photograph (1962).

## EARLY HISTORY

Georgetown was formally established in 1751 when the Maryland Assembly authorized "laying out and erecting a town on Potomac river, above the mouth of Rock Creek, in Frederick county" on sixty acres of land belonging to George Beall and George Gordon. Beall's portion was part of the 795-acre Rock of Dumbarton tract patented in 1703 to his father, Colonel Ninian Beall, along the west bank of Rock Creek. Gordon had acquired his portion in 1734. A merchant, he quickly established a commercial center including a ferry landing from the Virginia shore (1738), a tobacco warehouse (1745), an official tobacco inspection station and a tavern (1747). A settlement grew up around the Rock Creek Landing as harsh political and economic conditions in Scotland impelled Scots to join



**"View of the Suburbs of the City of Washington"** by George I. Parkyn, c. 1795. Georgetown waterfront looking upriver towards Three Sisters. Courtesy Library of Congress.

their countrymen here. In 1748, when Frederick County was created westward from Rock Creek, Gordon was appointed sheriff and judge of the first Frederick County Court. Denied funds to build a jail, he relied upon stocks for the punishment of law-breakers.

Seven commissioners were appointed by a 1751 Act to acquire, survey and lay out the land for the town. There were to be eighty lots of equal size, with sufficient space for streets, lanes, and alleys. The commissioners were empowered to make rules and orders for regulating the new town, which was to be called George Town in honor of King George II. The lots went fast: sixty-nine were sold in March 1752. Robert Peter, agent for the British tobacco merchants who then dominated Potomac River shipping, built a store and a warehouse on a lot located near George Gordon's tobacco warehouse. Assuming a leadership role in the town, he was appointed commissioner in 1757, serving continuously until 1790 when he became the newly incorporated town's first mayor.

George Town was laid out on the bluffs above the harbor on either side of the Frederick Town rolling road, now Wisconsin Avenue. Above the harbor, the road coming from the falls to the west and the roads from the earlier-settled regions of Maryland to the east intersected with the Frederick Town road in the line of the present M Street. Then as now, this was the principal intersection of the town. The streets of George Town were named in the English fashion in reference to the activities taking place in their immediate neighborhoods. Wisconsin Avenue was called High to the north and Water to the south. M Street was called Bridge to the east, and The Falls to the west. The configuration of the waterfront in 1751 was very different from that which we know today, running northeast from Wisconsin Avenue along the then-broad entrance to Rock Creek, which was navigable up to P Street. All of the waterfront land below this line is fill, added little by little over the years below the original steep and rocky terrain as the harbor developed.

Aside from the street plan oriented toward the harbor and a very few buildings, outbuildings, and portions of buildings



**Old Stone House**, 3051 M Street (1765). Oldest remaining house in Georgetown, built for Christopher Lehman. Courtesy Kiplinger Washington Collection, W.E. Barrett photograph (1965).

incorporated into later construction, little remains of colonial George Town. A saw pit for cutting framing timbers, planks and weather-boarding was located on Rock Creek near the present P Street when Beall acquired the Rock of Dumbarton in 1703. Timber and stone were plentiful and were used in the construction of early buildings. In the prosperous years after the Revolutionary War the town expanded rapidly. The first extension of the original town had come in 1769. Three more were made between 1783 and 1785, bringing Georgetown close to its present size. Congress fixed Georgetown's boundaries in 1809, amending them in 1814 to include three more additions as illustrated in Francis Fenwick's 1814 map. These are approximately the boundaries set by Congress in 1950 for the Georgetown Historic District.



**Dodge Warehouses**, 1000-08 Wisconsin Avenue, 3205 K Street (1813-24). Federal-era warehouses on waterfront, built on foundations of earlier stone warehouse c. 1760. Occupied by shipping merchant Francis Dodge 1807-51. 1010 Wisconsin (c. 1807-13), residence and shop of Isaac Tenney. Courtesy Kiplinger Washington Collection, W.E. Barrett photograph (1965).

In the Federal period brick replaced stone in construction of both residential and commercial buildings. Builders were increasingly influenced by stylistic considerations and the work of architects. The mansions of wealthy ship owners, merchants, and land speculators were built above the harbor on Prospect and N Streets. Hotels, taverns, banks, and other commercial buildings were constructed along M Street and in the waterfront area. Brick warehouses rose on the foundations of earlier stone structures. Speculative housing appeared, including the notable Federal row at 3327-3339 N Street, built c. 1815 by John Cox, and the row at 3255-3267 N Street built c. 1812 by Walter and Clement Smith.

On the heights above the town the squares remained intact and undivided. The magnificent residences built there were in reality self-sufficient little farms with livestock, orchards, and kitchen gardens included in formally designed landscapes. Bellevue, renamed Dumbarton House when acquired by the Colonial Dames of America as their headquarters in 1928, was built c. 1800 at 2715 Q



**Cox's Row**, 3327-3339 N Street (c. 1815). Tanya Edwards Beauchamp photograph (1998).

Street. Evermay, at 1623 28th Street, was built by Samuel Davidson c. 1801. William Hammond Dorsey built the house at 3101 R Street now known as Dumbarton Oaks c. 1801. Thomas Peter, son of Robert Peter, and his wife Martha Parke Custis, granddaughter of Martha Washington, built their home Tudor Place with a legacy to Martha from her step-grandfather, President George Washington. In the river below the town, in 1792, John Mason inherited Analostan Island from his father, George Mason IV, framer of the Bill of Rights. Making his home here, he transformed the island, now Theodore Roosevelt Island, into an agricultural showplace.

*"George-Town... has a beautiful appearance from the S. Side of the River, & the Hills on the back of the Town which are improved with handsome Country Seats & which in some Situations will now sell for 50 guineas an acre, command a noble View of the Town, of the City of Washington & of the Potomack quite down to Alexandria. Mason's Island in front of the E. End of the Town adds much to the Beauty of the view. The town may contain 150 families & between 30 & 40 very good brick Buildings... George-Town has a Goal [jail] & small market, the Streets are pretty regular, tho the Hills are waving."*

Chancellor James Kent of New York, 1793



**Tudor Place**, 1644 31st Street (1805-1816), designed by William Thornton, original architect of the U.S. Capitol. One of the finest Federal-era houses in the U.S. Occupied continuously by the Peter family until given to the Tudor Place Foundation in 1984. Courtesy Tudor Place Foundation.

## GOVERNANCE

Independence from Great Britain brought democratic government. In 1789 Georgetown was incorporated by the Maryland Assembly with an elected government composed of a Mayor, Recorder, Aldermen, and Common Councilmen having broad legislative, executive and judicial powers. Georgetown had been authorized as an official inspection point for the export of tobacco (1747), flour (1771), potash and pearl ash (1792), and regulation of the harbor was a major concern. Early ordinances of the Corporation also confronted day-to-day problems of the town including fire protection, street lights, removal of stinking fish, and control of geese, swine, goats and other livestock running free in the streets. The Corporation built a frame Market House c. 1796 on the present market site at 3276 M Street, replacing a nearby open marketplace, and Congress established the Georgetown Custom House in 1799. Georgetowners had purchased a hand-



**Vigilant Firehouse**, 1066 Wisconsin Avenue (1844). Oldest remaining firehouse in the District of Columbia. Vigilant Fire Company organized 1817. Plaque memorializes "Bush, the Old Fire Dog, died of Poison, July 5th, 1869, R.I.P." Courtesy Kiplinger Washington Collection, W. E. Barrett photograph (1962).

pumped fire engine in 1789. The Corporation assumed control of this engine in 1803, the only one in the District of Columbia. All householders were required to provide as many leather fire buckets as there were stories in their houses.

## COMMERCE AND INTERNAL IMPROVEMENTS

Countinghouses, stock companies, and banks were essential to Georgetown's prosperity. The colonial harbor trade had been financed by British trading firms, creating a debit economy which persisted after independence. The Bank of Columbia, chartered in Georgetown in 1793, financed the acquisition of land for the Federal City. With a branch bank in the U. S. Treasury, it paid dividends of eight or nine percent in the early years of the century. In 1810 the Union Bank of Georgetown was organized at the Union Hotel, followed in 1814 by the Farmers and Mechanics Bank of Georgetown. In 1928 this bank, having survived all the financial disasters of the nineteenth century, merged with Riggs Bank.

Georgetowners invested heavily in internal improvements essential to the town's commercial growth. When George Washington's Patowmack Company was incorporated in 1785, Georgetowners, who had for many years invested in efforts to open the Potomac to navigation beyond tidewater, enthusiastically subscribed to its stock. Construction began immediately on a series of channel improvements and skirting canals which would bring western produce to Georgetown markets and shipping. The outlet section of the canal from Little Falls to head of tidewater above Georgetown was completed in 1795.

In 1791 the George-town Bridge Company was incorporated to build the first bridge across the Potomac,



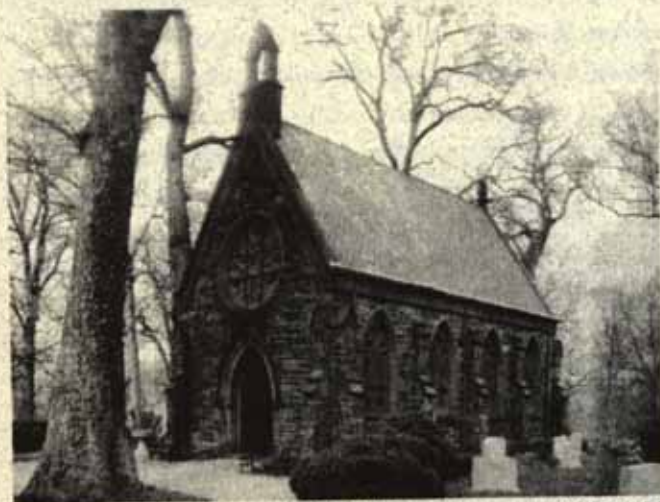
*"Sketch of the Bridge at the Little Falls of the Potowmack", by architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe, 1798. One of the earliest long trussed arch-bed bridges designed by Timothy Palmer. Technology first used in 1792. Pre-fabricated and shipped from Newburyport, Connecticut. Courtesy Maryland Historical Society.*

located just below the Little Falls. The road connecting it with Georgetown, completed in 1797, ran along the Patowmack Canal, establishing the most direct route to the town from the rich agricultural lands of northern Virginia. Like the Patowmack Canal, the Little Falls Bridge involved innovative internationally-acclaimed engineering technology and great risk to its intrepid Georgetown investors. In 1813 the Falls Bridge Turnpike Company was incorporated to build a modern toll road connecting Georgetown with the new Leesburg Turnpike. Repeatedly destroyed by the fury of the Potomac River floods, the Little Falls Bridge has been replaced eight times and is popularly known as Chain Bridge after an early (1808) state-of-the-art suspension bridge designed by James Finley.

Commercial opportunity seemed unbounded in the expansion economy of the early federal period. Men of modest means and humble origins were able to accumulate great wealth. In 1788 Thomas Corcoran settled in Georgetown, operating a leather and shoe business out of his house in the waterfront area.

Prospering, he built a house at 3119 Bridge (M) Street where his son, William Wilson Corcoran was born. George Peabody came to Georgetown in 1812 with an uncle who set up a dry goods business. The younger Peabody was a peddler, carrying his goods door to door through the adjacent countryside. He soon went into business with Elisha Riggs, moved to Baltimore in 1815, and made his fortune in the House of Morgan. Riggs' son and Corcoran became partners in a Georgetown dry goods business. Thomas Corcoran served five terms as mayor of Georgetown.

In 1840, William Wilson Corcoran and George W. Riggs, son of Corcoran's father's partner, joined forces as Corcoran and Riggs. Acquiring the assets of the defunct Bank of the United States, the firm financed the U. S. government during the Mexican War. Known as Riggs Bank after Corcoran's retirement in 1854, it became one of the strongest banks in the country. Corcoran devoted his fortune to philanthropic purposes. In Georgetown he purchased Parrot's Woods on the steep hillside above Rock Creek at Road (R) Street in 1848 and donated it to the town. Laid out as a cemetery by George F. de la Roche in the fashionable picturesque manner, Oak Hill Cemetery became a romantic park of curving walks and flowering trees beneath ancient oaks. The chapel, and probably the gates, were designed by architect James Renwick, designer of the Smithsonian Castle building and gates as well as the original Corcoran Gallery of Art.



*Oak Hill Cemetery Chapel, (1850) 30th & R Streets. James Renwick, architect. DCSHPO photo, James Massey, photographer (1986).*

## SLAVES AND FREEDMEN

From the beginning of the Revolutionary War in 1776 to the advent of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in 1930, about one-third of the population of Georgetown was African American. In 1800 approximately one-third of these were free. The number of free African Americans

in Georgetown gradually increased over the years, until, at the time of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, they greatly outnumbered slaves. Although the Corporation of Georgetown enacted legislation restricting the activities of freedmen and slaves, significant opportunities existed for both in Georgetown's relatively open urban environment. Maryland had from the beginning been the refuge of freethinkers and the home of religious tolerance. African Americans in Georgetown, both free and slave, included carpenters, teamsters, shoemakers, housekeepers, and other skilled workers who contributed significantly to the town's prosperity.



**Portrait of Yarrow Mamout,** by Charles Willson Peale, 1819. Courtesy Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Some opportunities existed for African Americans to share in the benefits of free enterprise in the town. Yarrow Mamout, a slave brought from Guinea before the Revolution, was freed after long servitude. Establishing a hauling business, he owned real estate, invested his savings in the stock of the Bank of Columbia, and lived on the dividends. His home at what is now 3330-3332 Dent Place was deeded to him in

1800. It was noted in 1816 that Thomas Main, a horticulturist who maintained the earliest plant nursery in the District of Columbia employed "five or six young blacks to cultivate his nursery, whom he nourishes, educates, and rewards with the annual sum of sixty-four dollars... He teaches them to read and write, and instructs them in moral duties. Joseph Moor, a manumitted black, who lived with him several years, is now a respectable grocer in Georgetown." Alfred Lee was another prosperous African American. In 1830 Lee established a very successful flour, grain, feed, and hay business at 2906 M Street which his family continued into the 1940s.

## RELIGION, EDUCATION, AND CULTURE

Georgetown's atmosphere of religious tolerance nurtured a broad spectrum of faiths. A log German Lutheran church was the first built in this town dominated by Presbyterian Scots. The Bridge Street Presbyterian Church was founded by the Reverend Stephen Bloomer Balch in 1782. During his fifty-year ministry Balch was a leader in the affairs of the town. Ecumenical in his approach, he sheltered an Episcopal congregation which organized as St. John's Church in 1795. Their building at 3240 O Street was designed by architect William Thornton and completed in 1809. The renowned



**Old Trinity Church,** 3515 N Street (c. 1794). Oldest Catholic church in D.C., now The Convent of Mercy. Courtesy Historical Society of Washington.

revivalist Francis Asbury preached in Georgetown in 1772. The Montgomery Street Methodist Church, the first Methodist church in the District of Columbia, was built in 1805.

At first African Americans attended these churches under segregated conditions. In 1814 the African

American members of the Montgomery Street Methodist Church, both free and slave, organized the first African American church in the District of Columbia. Two years later the new congregation purchased a lot at 27th and P Streets and built its own church known as "the Meeting House" and "The Ark," renamed Mt. Zion Methodist Episcopal Church in 1844. The Female Union Band Society, a benevolent group formed by members of this congregation, bought land for a cemetery in the old Methodist burying ground at 27th and O Streets in 1842. The underground railroad, active in Georgetown, is said to have sheltered runaway slaves there.

Georgetown has always been renowned for its educational institutions. Private schools existed here as early as 1779.

George Town College, the first Catholic school of higher education in this country, opened its doors in 1791. A small girls' school begun nearby in 1799 was incorporated by Congress in 1828 as the Academy of the Visitation. The Billings School, 3100-08 Dumbarton Street, enrolled both

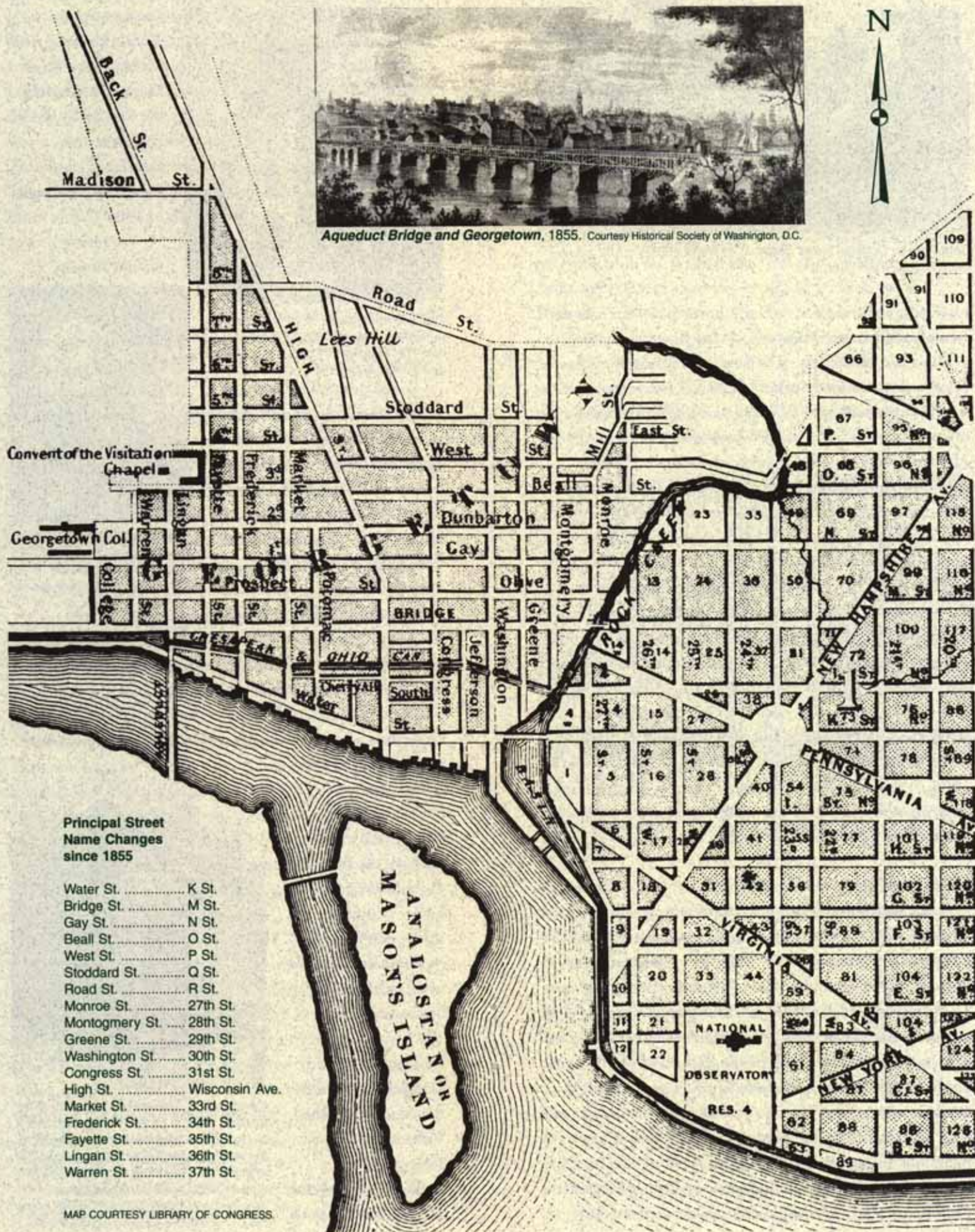


**Community House of the Mt. Zion Church,** 2906 O Street (1813). Residence of free black members of congregation. Surviving example of English cottage architecture. Restored as archives of African American life in Georgetown, with assistance of 1985 DCSHPO/HPF grant. Courtesy Mt. Zion United Methodist Church Archives.

# GEORGETOWN AND THE CITY OF WASHINGTON, 1855



Aqueduct Bridge and Georgetown, 1855. Courtesy Historical Society of Washington, D.C.





**Georgetown College in the 1840s.** Old North (1795) at left. Courtesy Historical Society of Washington, D. C.

black and white students when it opened in 1807. In the face of neighborhood protests, it closed and re-opened as a school for blacks only. The Lancaster School Society of Georgetown founded a school at 3126 O Street in 1810 which, supported by the Corporation of Georgetown, offered free education to both boys and girls, including African Americans. This marked the advent of public education for girls and African Americans in the District of Columbia. Miss Lydia English's Female Seminary, for upper-class girls, opened in 1816. The Mount Zion Methodist Episcopal Church opened a school for black children in 1823. Circulating libraries, maintained in connection with publishing and bookselling enterprises, operated in Georgetown as early as 1792. At the request of a group of Georgetown citizens, Congress incorporated the Columbian Library Company in 1804. Georgetown's first newspaper, *The Times and Potowmack Packet*, began publication in 1789, followed by ten other short-lived newspapers before the arrival of the federal government in 1800. The Columbian Agricultural Society was organized in Georgetown in 1810, and its fair, sponsored that May, was the first agricultural fair held in this country.

### CHESAPEAKE & OHIO CANAL

Planning began in the early 1820s for an in-ground canal, modeled on New York's Erie Canal, which would establish a dependable transportation route from Cumberland in western Maryland to the head of Potomac tidewater. In 1828 the assets of the Patowmack Company were transferred to the newly formed Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Company, and construction of the initial section from Seneca, Maryland to Little Falls began. Gala ground-breaking ceremonies on July 4, 1828 began in Georgetown with a parade led by the full band of the Marine Corps marching through to the Wisconsin Avenue wharf as crowds cheered. The official party—including President John Quincy Adams, members of his cabinet, the full

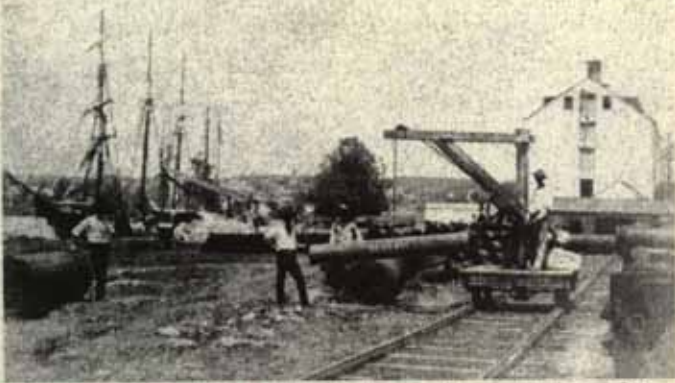
diplomatic corps, representatives of Congress, surviving officers of the Revolutionary Army, and two troops of cavalry—embarked for the ceremonial site in a flotilla of three steamboats, a line of tugs, and a variety of private boats while the crowds ran cheering along the shore. Ground was broken by the president near the outlet of the old Patowmack Canal.

Georgetown lobbied for extending the canal directly through the town above the harbor. In addition to the obvious shipping advantages, the water from the canal could be used to power flour mills and other industrial enterprises on the waterfront. The Port of Alexandria demanded that an aqueduct bridge be built across the Potomac, at the site of today's Key Bridge, to carry the canal directly to their harbor. By 1831 the canal had been completed from Seneca through Georgetown and in 1833 work began on the Aqueduct Bridge. The canal was completed to within fifty miles of Cumberland by 1839, and reached Cumberland in 1850.



**The Bomford Mill, 3261 K Street (1845-47).** Built on site of 1832 flour mill, burned in 1844. Utilized water power from canal. Cotton mill 1847 to Civil War. Converted again to flour mill 1883. Note steamboat on river, canal with boat unloading in foreground. *Boyd's Washington Directory, 1886.*

Lieutenant Montgomery C. Meigs supervised construction of the Washington Aqueduct to supply city water (1853-63) from an office near the Georgetown Market House. Meigs, an engineer and West Point graduate, served as the army's Quartermaster General during the Civil War. He designed the Pension Building (1882-87), now the National Building Museum, as a memorial to the Union Army. By 1860, Georgetown's water was being piped over College Pond and Rock Creek, with an engine installed at Rock Creek to pump water to a high-level reservoir on the present site of the public library at Wisconsin and R Streets. The pump did not function adequately, however, and residents of upper Georgetown had no city water until the system was completed after the war.



**Aqueduct Wharf, (1853).** Unloading construction materials for D.C. water system. Courtesy Smithsonian Institution.

The completion of the canal and the availability of its water power for industrial use restored Georgetown's economy, but only temporarily. In 1857-58 the federal government built a new Custom House and Post Office at 1221 31st Street to handle the increased shipping from the canal. Designed by Ammi B. Young, Supervising Architect of the Treasury, it was one of a series of superb government buildings constructed in this country in the years before the Civil War. In 1852, Andrew Jackson Downing and Calvert Vaux designed two houses in the



**Francis Dodge House, 1517 30th Street (1850-53),** published in style-setting *Villas and Cottages*, Vaux, 1857.

picturesque Italianate style for Robert and Francis Dodge, sons of merchant Francis Dodge. Downing was in town to design the landscaping of the National Mall.

## THE CIVIL WAR AND BEYOND

The Civil War brought many changes. Georgetown residents were strongly divided in their loyalties, and many moved away for the duration. All available buildings were requisitioned for military uses such as hospitals, officers' quarters, barracks, and supply depots. Louisa May Alcott, the author of *Little Women*, worked as a nurse in the Union Hotel. Her book *Hospital Sketches* depicted the deplorable conditions in the ward set up in the hotel ballroom. The canal, roads, and bridges were used for military purposes and deteriorated under rough treatment. The Aqueduct Bridge was drained to accommodate the retreat of Union troops from the first battle of Manassas and made into a permanent road-bridge. War-time improvements included incorporation of the Washington and Georgetown Railroad Company in 1862, construction



**Ferry leaving Virginia shore for Georgetown under guard of Union soldiers c. 1861.** Courtesy Peabody Room, Georgetown Public Library. Matthew Brady Studio photograph.

of a new market house at 3276 M Street in 1863-65, and installation of telegraph and sewer lines.

After emancipation, the African American population of Georgetown increased by sixty percent through migration of freedmen from the South. The impoverished newcomers settled in the established Herring Hill neighborhood along Rock Creek, in the waterfront area, and to the west near Georgetown University where cheap and often substandard housing could be found. They were soon assimilated into Georgetown's independent, close-knit African American community. The Reverend Sandy Alexander, newly freed, founded the First Baptist Church at 29th and O Streets in 1862. The Mount Zion United Methodist Church received its first African American minister, the Reverend John H. Brice, in 1864. The present church was built at 1334 29th Street (1876-1884). In 1879 the congregation leased the old Methodist burying ground for their cemetery.



**Georgetown Market, 3276 M Street (1863-65).** Courtesy Commission of Fine Arts, Leet Brothers photograph (c. 1937).

Enfranchised by Congress over the veto of President Andrew Johnson, the Georgetown African American community embraced political activism. The mayoral election of 1867 was scrutinized by the national press.



**"The Georgetown Election"**, Thomas Nast cartoon, *Harper's Weekly*, March 16, 1867, President Johnson at left. Courtesy Washingtoniana Room of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library.

Holding mass rallies and political strategy meetings in public for the first time, the African American voters of Georgetown withstood the insults of unruly non-resident mobs at the polls to unite behind the equal rights candidate. In 1870 Alfred Pope, a successful Georgetown entrepreneur who was born a slave in South Carolina, was entrusted with the important task of representing Georgetown before Congress regarding the proposed merger of the town with Washington City.

Education was high on the agenda of Georgetown's African Americans. The Chamberlain School was built on 26th between P and Q Streets in 1866. A year later it was reported that 400 "colored" children attended this overcrowded facility. In 1873 Pope was elected a member of the Board of Trustees of the Colored Schools of Washington and Georgetown together with John Ferguson, another Georgetown leader. A strong middle class developed

within the African American community, continuing the tradition of social activism through churches, benevolent societies, and social clubs. In 1873, Jesuit priest Patrick F. Healy became president of Georgetown University, the first African American president of a predominantly white university. The landmark Healy Hall is named in his honor.



**Alfred Pope**, (1890's).  
Courtesy Hannah Nash Williams.

In 1871 the District of Columbia asserted its authority over Georgetown, revoking the town's charter and thereby its independent mayor and council form of government, its court and all other aspects of its status as an independent town. A witty woman had once commented that Washington was a city of streets without houses and Georgetown a city of houses without streets. Now Governor Alexander Shepherd extended his street realignment program to Georgetown's hilly terrain, but with mixed success. In 1867, philanthropist and financier George Peabody endowed a public library for the town where he had begun



**Curtis School**, (1875)  
demolished in 1951. Courtesy  
Charles Sumner School Archives.

his career. The Curtis School, erected in 1875 on O Street west of Wisconsin, housed the Peabody Library and the Linthicum Institute, with space for "philosophical lectures and evening classes in various practical studies." This was one of seven innovative urban public schools designed for the District of Columbia by Washington architect Adolf Cluss.

As long as the canal continued in operation, the waterfront prospered. Flour mills, cooperages, a fertilizer company, soap company, carriage manufacturer, ice, cement and lime companies, and ironworks were located there in the



**Wisconsin Avenue Bridge** (1829) over Chesapeake & Ohio Canal. Late 19th century. Courtesy Library of Congress.

1880s. In 1889 the canal was severely damaged by a Potomac River flood. The canal company, bankrupted, ceased operation and was acquired by the rival Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. Now heavy industry, including the powerhouse of the Capital Traction Company (1910) and



**Monticello House**, 33rd and M Streets (1810), meeting place of African American social clubs in the 1920s. Originally home of William Whann, cashier of the Bank of Columbia, now demolished. Note cobblestone paving. Courtesy Historical Society of Washington, D.C.

numerous factories, garages, construction companies, and machine shops, were located on the Georgetown waterfront and M Street. The Washington and Old Dominion Railroad, and the Georgetown and Leesburg turnpike over Chain Bridge maintained a vital link with the agricultural communities of northern Virginia. In 1924 the Francis Scott Key bridge replaced the Aqueduct Bridge.

Although Georgetown had lost its official status as an independent town, its identity as a self-sufficient community continued. It remained an urban center, maintaining the commercial connections established



**Residence of Dr. Charles H. Marshall**, 2710 P Street, c. 1908, in the days of house calls. Dr. Marshall was one of the first African Americans to practice medicine in Georgetown (1894). Courtesy Peabody Room, Georgetown Public Library and C. Marshall, III.

earlier. The turn of the century saw the largest expansion of building stock in Georgetown's history. Every possible site was developed to provide housing for the rapidly expanding federal government. A recent HPF/DCSHPO survey shows



**Workers' housing on the Georgetown waterfront**, 1031-21 Cecil Place (1890). Courtesy Kiplinger Washington Collection, W. E. Barrett photograph (1965).

that 88 percent of the present building stock was constructed after 1870. The African American community flourished, becoming increasingly self-reliant as more of its members owned real estate, established businesses, and entered the professions.

Churches and social groups still provided the basis for unity and activism. In spite of segregation Georgetown maintained its historically vibrant, diverse character.

After World War I, the increasing industrialization of the waterfront lessened the desirability of the town as a residential neighborhood. Although many of the old families continued to live there in the first quarter of the twentieth century, some in considerable affluence, Georgetown was no longer fashionable. Old and shabby, its political and commercial autonomy vanished, it was often characterized as a slum and its waterfront as an eyesore. Many living in Georgetown now were semi-skilled laborers and others attracted by low cost housing. A growing national interest in historic preservation would soon reverse this situation.

## HISTORIC PRESERVATION

In 1920 Mr. and Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss purchased Dumbarton Oaks and began a twenty-year project to perfect its house and gardens. They were joined in 1923 by fellow diplomat Ferdinand Lamot Belin. Belin literally saved Evermay from demolition as this spectacular site was about to be cleared for construction of an apartment house. Others followed suit and soon many early residences, great and small, were being restored. Those who came to work in the idealistic New Deal administration of Franklin Roosevelt embraced this small-scale historic town within walking distance of the White House. Many African Americans were among those who took advantage of the appreciating real estate market to move to better housing in other parts of the city. Many others were displaced through passage of the Alley Dwelling Act of 1935 or were unable to afford the

increasing rents as property values rose. Georgetown's historic diversity was thereby irretrievably destroyed.

As early as 1933 the Commission of Fine Arts was asked for advice about the preservation of historic Georgetown. The Historic American Buildings Survey began its activities that year, recording the Francis Scott Key House with measured drawings and photographs before its demolition. In 1938 the Department of the Interior acquired the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal as an historic site. The National Park Service restored the twenty-two miles between Georgetown and Seneca, opening them in 1940 for public recreational use. In 1947, construction of the Whitehurst Freeway resulted in the demolition of large numbers of waterfront and canal-related historic buildings. In 1950, responding to citizen protest, Congress passed the Old Georgetown Act setting the boundaries of the Georgetown Historic District and providing for the review of all plans for the construction, alteration, reconstruction, or razing of any building within its limits. This was supplemented in 1972 by the District of Columbia Historic Protection Act.



**Richly varied streetscape.** 3062-3072 M Street, reflects the 250 year commercial vitality of Georgetown. Courtesy Kiplinger Washington Collection, W. E. Barrett photograph (1963)

Archaeological exploration has released many secrets from the earth in historic Georgetown. Digs have been conducted under the guidance of the DCSHPO at Halcyon House, the Georgetown Incinerator, the Francis Scott Key Park, the Forrest-Marbury House, the Foxall-Stoddert House, the Georgetown Market House, the Whitehurst Freeway, and other sites. Both prehistoric and historic artifacts have been found, revealing much about the lives of Native Americans here at the confluence of Rock Creek and the Potomac River, and those who came later to build the town. The entire historic district, in fact,

possesses great potential for additional recovery of artifacts from which we can continue to learn about the lives of earlier residents.

The Georgetown Historic District represents all aspects of the 250-year history of this unique historic town. More than eighty historic landmarks were individually designated before such designations were halted as needless where almost every building constructed before 1940 is viewed as contributing to the significant history of the town. The small scale of both residential and commercial buildings, the sense of openness achieved by the preservation of gardens and trees, and the limitation of commercial rear-lot coverage are all essential to the preservation of the integrity of the historic district.

Georgetown today is embraced by parkland on all sides. Its "waving" hills have been smoothed somewhat, but still afford picturesque views of the nation's capital, the Potomac River and the pretty island now returned to nature as a memorial to President Theodore Roosevelt. The view of the Potomac Gorge beyond Key Bridge is still very like the vista known to the Analostan Indians and admired by Captain John Smith and Henry Fleete at the beginning of European settlement. Industrial use of the waterfront has vanished, supplanted by boathouses, parks, and restaurants.

Although the streets are now lined with the continuous facades of a wide variety of buildings, it is the open space in the interiors of the squares, with gardens and trees seen over low-scale facades, which give the historic district its unique character. Within the old port town, gardens are omnipresent. The perfection of the estate gardens on the heights, including Dumbarton Oaks, Evermay, and Tudor Place, is emulated everywhere in Georgetown by elegant dooryard plantings, surprising views through gates, over walls, and from alleys of intimate private gardens in the interior of squares.

Geese and swine no longer roam Georgetown streets. Cows and chickens have been banished from backyards. Residents not lucky enough to have a spring or well in their gardens are no longer obliged to trek to the corner pump for water, as many did until the end of the Civil War. The wooden blocks which once paved the streets of the fortunate are gone, although street excavations are still turning up water pipes hollowed from whole trees in the mid-nineteenth century. Today even the most humble buildings have acquired a rich lustre from inclusion in the historic district.

**William A. Gordon, in his memoirs, "Recollections of a Boyhood in Georgetown" described the waterfront in the 1850s as follows:**

*At the wharves, which extended along the whole front of the town, were generally numbers of vessels loading and unloading. Water Street, which was occupied by the wholesale merchants, offered many attractions. It was a busy place, the street crowded with carts and drays, and at certain seasons of the year with lines of large covered wagons, drawn by four or six horse teams with bows of bells on shoulders, and loaded with produce from Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia; the warehouses filled with flour, tobacco, whiskey, salt, grain and other merchandise. One place was a source of never-ending delight, the old warehouses on the western part of the street near the aqueduct bridge, which in the early days of the town had been used as depots by the Indian traders. From time to time the iron-bound doors were opened and the boys allowed to rummage around. By digging in the moist dirt floors they were able to find Indian beads and bells. The beads were like sections of pipestems about an inch long made of highly glazed earthenware, and in color red, blue, white and parti-colors, and being of varied degrees of rarity had established value amongst and were used for trading purposes by the boys. Almost in front of these warehouses on the river bank was a large saw-mill of heavy timbers, not enclosed, where the logs which had been floated down the river were hauled up and saved into lumber. Next to this mill was an iron furnace or smelter where to the delight of the boys the workmen, generally naked to the waist, moved about in the glare of the molten metal. Then there were the numerous flour mills and a cotton factory which we were allowed on rare occasions to visit, the intricate machinery of which inspired admiration and astonishment. Another place we liked to get permission to visit was Brown's bakery, on the north side of the street, where the ship-biscuit, or hard-tack, used in the United States Navy, was baked. The place was clean and permeated with a sweet moist smell, and to see the process of mixing the flour, forming the dough in shapes, putting it into and taking it from the ovens, and packing the biscuits, was interesting; but to be presented with a large warm newly-baked biscuit was a delight. A short distance lower was the Corporation Fish Wharf, where thousands of shad and hundreds of thousands of herring were brought by the small river vessels and sold. Here the fish were cleaned for salting and packing by negro fish-women, rough and profane of speech, but generally kind to the boys of their acquaintance. In front of the wharf, which was a vile-smelling place, the boys would fish, supplied with bait by the fish-women, and as great numbers of small fish were attracted by the offal swept into the river, as many as desired could easily be caught. Still lower down was the Dodge warehouse, a never ending source of delight. The firm was engaged in trading in their own vessels with the West Indies and South America, and were large importers of sugar and molasses. Each year a sale took place, the wharves being covered with hogsheads, and buyers from the large cities of the North attending. On these occasions, the boys were allowed to move about through the rows of hogsheads supplied with long straws, which they would dip through the bung-hole open for inspection and feast on the molasses drawn out. The counting house was capacious, and decorated with curios brought from the tropics, such as flying fish, shark's jaws, and sword-fish and saw-fish. On the sale days elaborate lunches were served, with fine cigars and every variety of drinkables for the guests. Out from the counting room extended a wide platform overlooking the river, furnished with chairs and benches, which on warm summer afternoons was used as a meeting and lounging place by the friends of the proprietors. At that time there was a great distinction between wholesale "merchants" and retail "shopkeepers," and a line distinctly drawn, the former being within the magic social circle, the latter outside of it. The captains of the trading vessels were very kind to the boys, and on their return from a voyage would give them sugar cane, oranges and other tropical fruit; invite them to join at meals (and how greatly enjoyed was what we considered sailor's food); and loan them the small boats for rowing and sculling.*

Records, Columbia Historical Society, V. 20 (1917), pp. 121-140.



The home of Francis Scott Key, Georgetown attorney, educator, and author of The Star-Spangled Banner. Built 1802 and purchased by Key in 1805. The Georgetown-Leesburg Turnpike Road (M Street) in foreground. Demolished 1947 for construction of Whitehurst Freeway. The Francis Scott Key Park now marks the site at 34th and M Streets. Painted by John Ross Key, grandson of Key in the mid-1850s. Courtesy Peabody Room, Georgetown Public Library.

**THE GEORGETOWN HISTORIC DISTRICT**  
by  
**TANYA EDWARDS BEAUCHAMP**

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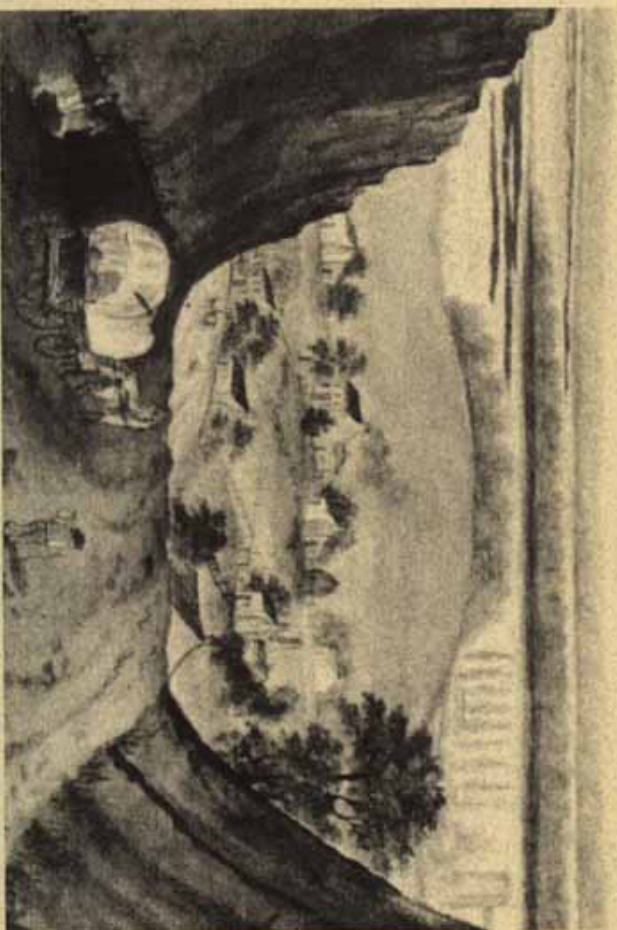
Georgetown Community Organizations concerned with preservation and revitalization of Historic Georgetown:

Citizens Association of Georgetown  
Foundation for the Preservation of Historic Georgetown  
Georgetown Heritage Trust  
Georgetown Residents Alliance

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Early nineteenth century view of Georgetown from the Frederick Town Road. Georgetown University at far right. Painted by Rebecca Wister Morris Nourse. Courtesy Dumbarton House.

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